

CELEBRATING LEARNING ON THE A.T.

Union County Middle School, Blairsville, Georgia

Union County Middle School in Blairsville, GA, has just completed a year of unprecedented emphasis on the Appalachian Trail. While participating as a committee member to bring Blairsville and Union County on board as an Appalachian Trail Community, Principal Donnie Kelley learned about the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Trail to Every Classroom (TTEC) program. He brought that to his own school by creating a program he called 14 Blazes, which allowed teachers to earn blazes by incorporating the A.T. into their lessons. After earning 14 blazes (one for each A.T. state), teachers qualified to enter into a school-wide competition to win \$2,181 (one dollar for every mile of the A.T.) worth of teaching supplies and professional development.

For teachers, the culmination of the activity took place at a Saturday night dinner at the end of April. That day the school celebrated a year of TTEC lessons, projects, posters, puzzles and poems—over 350 of them in fact. Walking into the fellowship hall where the event took place, one immediately grasped the amount of work and dedication teachers had contributed to inspire their students who created, researched and assembled such astounding productions.

While Cornbread Ted and the Butter Beans played upbeat tunes, teachers and guests browsed through beautiful prints on student-constructed walls, oil pastels, books that students had prepared on A.T. related topics, sculptures, bowls and best of all, a bat cave. Yes, you read that right—they constructed a cave complete with a black light so you could see enough to sign the register. Bats, a fire and a quote written on the decorated walls of the cave set the tone. And just to make sure the A.T. experience and environment were fully accounted for, a beautifully handmade tree with fall leaves was also at the entryway of the cave.

After the meal, guests were treated to a 14-minute student-led video that showcased the different aspects of the school's participation in the A.T. From mathematics to art, on the Trail and in the school, students showed their excitement and teachers shared their orchestration in a symphony of a Trail To Every Classroom in their school.

After the video, it was award time! ATC honored Principal Donnie Kelley with the Regional Partnership Committee's Partner of the Year Award. This award is given to an individual who has shown exceptional leadership and made significant contributions to the Trail. Donnie earned it by his extraordinary commitment in helping Blairsville-Union County become designated as an A.T. Community, his serving as the community's A.T. Ambassador, and his spearheading the most successful TTEC program ever!

The 14 Blazes Award went to Union County Middle School Art Teacher Sylvia Garner, who managed to incorporate interviews, 3-D media, origami, printmaking (student prints are on sale at local outfitter Mountain Crossings, with proceeds given to ATC), oil pastels, local authors, A.T. rock sculpture and of course, the bat cave. She made

sure the A.T. was a part of conversation in her classroom every day. Both her sons are thru-hiking the A.T. this year, and she even doled out tootsie rolls to those who guessed appropriately the question on the sign taped above her white blaze T-shirt, asking, "what's this?" Speaking of T-shirts, yep, the school had those made too!

For students, the high point of the year (both figuratively and literally) came a few weeks later when all of them got a chance to hike part of the A.T. Nearly four hundred 6th and 7th grade students visited Springer Mountain, where GATC members Tony Rogers and Tom Ottinger spoke to them about Benton MacKaye and the Springer plaque. About thirty 8th graders also hiked from Springer down to the Hike Inn for the night and did a Trail-maintenance project the next day. And the entire



8th grade (over 150 students) hiked to the top of Blood Mountain the following week.

Prior to this year, despite living within a few miles of the Appalachian Trail, the majority of students at Union County Middle School had never even heard of it. Even fewer had ever set foot on it. Now, thanks to the work of the school faculty and administration and the cooperative efforts of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, the Appalachian Trail

Conservancy, and the Blue Ridge District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, these students have experienced firsthand the beauty of the natural world along the Appalachian Trail. And they recognize the importance of preserving it for future generations.